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ABSTRACT

The "revolving door syndrome" refers to the ease with which students are able to enroll in community colleges and the equal ease with which they can drop out. In addition to traditional retention strategies, such as assessment, placement, orientation and advising, innovative approaches have been implemented at five community colleges nationwide. At St. Louis Community College, in Missouri, an effort was made to focus on stopouts by sending letters to all non-returning students in summer 1990, expressing continued interest in the student and reminding them of fall registration dates. The intervention resulted in a statistically significant increase in student re-enrollment. As the result of a survey of the educational goals of non-returning students at Del Mar College, in Texas, a standardized educational plan for all undeclared majors was initiated and public relations staff were made available for assistance during registration. Pennsylvania College of Technology achieved a 4% increase in retention of new students by ensuring that orientation activities such as advising, testing, scheduling, and campus tours were all accomplished on one day, while students at Miami-Dade Community College, in Florida, are sorted into groups based on test scores and provided with academic support throughout their program. Finally, the Puente Project at 23 California community colleges provides developmental English classes, mentors, and peer support for Latino/Chicano students. (ECC)

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by Jan M. Ignash

Of the 5,376,000 students projected to attend two-year institutions in 1993 (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1992), a fair number will be caught in the "revolving door syndrome." The phrase refers to the ease with which students are able to enroll in community colleges and the equal ease with which they can drop out. Implementing successful strategies to retain students until they achieve their educational goals is a problem for many community colleges. Traditional strategies for improving student retention rates have focused on assessment and placement, orientation, counseling and academic advising, developmental education, flexible and experimental instructional techniques, use of peer tutors, faculty support and inservice training, and ancillary support services (Roueche, 1983; Bushnell, 1991; Seidman, 1991). Many exemplary student retention programs are currently operating in community colleges across the country; the five described below provide practical strategies to foster improved student retention.

An Intervention Strategy for Stop-Outs: St. Louis Community College

Past efforts at St. Louis Community College to increase student retention have involved advising and counseling, academic support, academic early warning systems, new-student orientation, and increased student activities (Tichenor and Cosgrove, 1991, p. 74). None of the programs, however, resulted in significant improvement of fall-to-spring retention rates. Institutional surveys conducted between 1984 and 1989 revealed that roughly half of the non-returning students had completed their educational goals and were "success" stories, while an average of 31% had "stopped out" between fall and spring, usually for job conflict or personal reasons. Of the stopout students, an average of 16-17% actually re-enrolled the following fall. College officials decided that these stop-out students would be an effective target group for intervention strategies to promote retention.

In the summer of 1990 a random sample of students who enrolled in fall 1989 but who failed to enroll the following spring semester were targeted for intervention. All non-returning students were included in the intervention. College officials felt that nondegree goal achievers and dropouts might also benefit from additional encouragement, since they periodically return to campus to follow lifelong learning goals. Two letters, signed by the Chancellor, were sent to students who had stopped out in spring. The first letter indicated that the student had been missed at the college during the spring semester and expressed the college's continuing interest in the student. The second letter was a reminder of fall registration. Results of a survey indicated that for students who did *not* receive the letters, re-enrollment rates were 16.9%, consistent with earlier years. The return rate for students who received letters, however, was 18.6% overall, a statistically significant difference (Tichenor and Cosgrove, 1991, p. 79). For white females, the return rate was 19.3%, and for black males, the rate was 22.4%. College officials concluded that it is worthwhile to survey non-returning students to discover whether they intend to return. If students indicate an intention to return, they should not be classified as dropouts, but rather "stop-outs" and targeted for intervention.

This study included any non-returning student. College officials point out, however, that including nondegree goal achievers and dropouts in the mailings may be a positive strategy, since both can benefit from additional encouragement. Future evaluations to assess long-term impact of the intervention are planned.

Distinguishing Dropouts from Stop-outs from Opt-outs: Del Mar College

At Del Mar College in Texas college officials believe that understanding students' reasons for attending college, their reasons for not returning, and their feelings about the college after they leave can assist in developing appropriate retention policies. On a survey of 2,313 students who were enrolled in fall 1990 but did not return in spring 1991, the top two reasons cited by students for initially attending Del Mar were a need for "personal improvement" and "to be with interesting people"(Artman and Gore, 1992, p. 3). These reasons were rated higher than transfer and job training options. Results of the survey indicate that college administrators need to provide an appropriate social/cultural environment for today's students and incorporate a more personal touch between the institution and the incoming students. Recommended strategies included establishing a standardized educational plan for all undeclared majors, using trained Advising Center staff rather than faculty to advise students on course selection and programs, using student government organizations to canvass students regarding their needs, providing public relations staff to assist students during the first registration session, and providing training sessions to teach students how to use the college catalog to locate services. In dealing with the problem of retaining underprepared students, college officials recommended an aggressive study skills program along with a policy requiring students to consult with instructors in person before dropping unwanted or difficult classes the week before final exams.

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Pennsylvania College of Technology's "One-Stop Shopping Model"

Studies have shown that students form pivotal impressions about the institution they will attend during the first week of school (Lenning et al [1980] in Bushnell [1991]). At Pennsylvania College of Technology in Williamsport, an Advising Center Project in place since December 1984 is aimed at ensuring that students who are accepted by the college actually enroll in classes and find their way successfully through the critical first days. Testing, advising, and scheduling of new students is all accomplished in one day. Distributing student ID cards, paying any necessary tuition deposits, touring campus facilities, and checking out local housing and meal plan options also take place at this time. Afternoon academic orientation sessions which are department-specific, rather than campus-wide, are held. At the orientation sessions, advisors and counselors help students plan their schedules and realistically appraise their chances of success based on placement tests taken during the morning session. College officials also telephone schedules students who do not show up at the orientation to ask if they wish to reschedule. The first year this "one-stop-shopping model" was implemented, the mean of students who were accepted and subsequently enrolled increased by 4% over the previous five years. The model earned an outstanding retention program citation at the 1987 NACADA conference.

Sorting and Supporting: Miami-Dade Community College

At Miami-Dade Community College, "sorting" and "supporting" procedures, as defined in a typology developed by Beatty-Guenter (1992, p. 8-9), are used to promote student retention. After admission, all entering students are "sorted" into classes based upon their assessment test scores in reading, mathematics, and writing. After placement, students are "supported" throughout their academic program at the college through an outreach program which expresses institutional concern. One of the intervention strategies which college officials claim has reduced their dropout rate involves contacting students if they miss classes (Roueche & Baker in Beatty-Guenter, 1992). A second strategy involves using computerized Advisement and Graduation Information System (AGIS) to show students not only what courses they have completed but also what courses are still required to complete their programs.

Retaining Minority Students: The Puente Program

Implemented at 23 California community colleges, the Puente Project is an innovative retention and transfer program designed for Chicano and Latino students. Students are admitted into the program by placing at the remedial level in English. The heart of the program is a two-semester sequence of English courses team-taught by an English instructor and a Hispanic counselor. The counselor-teacher teams receive inservice training in cultural and pedagogical issues at summer retreats. Puente students are assigned mentors within the Hispanic community who have similar occupational interests. A strong peer support system also develops naturally among Puente students. Academic progress is monitored throughout the program and counselors assist students with financial aid, budgeting, and family concerns. A statewide Puente Program Office assists students in transferring to the University of California system. The success of the Puente Project is documented in reports from the California Community Colleges' Chancellor's Office. In 1989, 83% of Puente students successfully completed a developmental writing class, and 72% of these students went on to complete English 1A successfully. While only one-third of 1% of the Hispanic students enrolled in California community colleges in 1986 transferred to the University of California, almost 7% of Puente students transfer to a UC campus, with 26% overall transferring to California four-year colleges.

Conclusion

While further studies assessing the long-range impact of retention efforts are needed, results from the above programs are promising. Many community colleges today are exploring traditional and innovative ways to assist their students to remain in college long enough to achieve their educational goals. Retention-oriented policies foster a student's right to succeed. Successful intervention strategies can thwart the revolving door syndrome and keep students enrolled long enough to accomplish what they set out to do.

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